

Chono

7 October 1960

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Situation in Laos

1. The situation in Laos now points toward two alternatives: 1) a neutralist Laos with the Pathet Lao represented in the government and the Assembly, with the key figures of the Phoumi faction excluded or relegated to minor roles; or 2) a reopening of civil war. Either alternative is painful to contemplate.

2. We base this view on the following considerations:

a. Kong Le's position has been greatly strengthened since the Pakxane and Ban Neua skirmishes. He still dominates the military situation in Vientiane and is in a position to veto or nullify military and political decisions taken by the government. His substantial political appeal to the Laotian people has increased greatly since the early days of the coup and he appears to be taking increasing interest in the political

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potentialities of his situation. There has been no discernible weakening in his determination to achieve his coup goals.

b. Souvanna's political position has weakened somewhat during the past two or three weeks because of the growing strength of Kong Le. However, Souvanna's personality and program have wide appeal among literate Laotians. We believe that Souvanna still can act as a moderating force on Kong Le, but we also believe that their objectives are essentially the same -- a neutral Laos and a negotiated end to civil strife and integration of the Pathet Lao into the social and political life of the country. Both men probably desire to eliminate Phoumi as a major force in Laotian military and political affairs. Kong Le probably desires to achieve this by more direct means than Souvanna.

c. Phoumi's position has steadily weakened. The military weakness of his troops was revealed by the Paksane and Ban Naun affairs. His following among regional and unit commanders has been reduced, and the rank and file among his troops have been unreliable in combat against the Vientiane forces. The political appeal and capabilities of the Boun Oun-Phoumi team do not appear to match those of the Souvanna-Kong Le combination on a national basis. In our view, Phoumi's potential in terms of an

anti-PL military effort or as a check or balance in a Souvanna regime is low. His continuance as a political and military factor is likely to be more disruptive than constructive in the present situation.

3. Souvanna probably hopes to achieve an orientation for Laos similar to that of Cambodia. Insofar as we can make out Kong Le's desires, such an orientation would be acceptable to him. Despite Souvanna's leftist-inclinations and his apparent naivete concerning the Communist convictions of many of the Pathet Lao, we do not believe that he is Communist or would willingly "hand Laos over to the Communists." Over the short run, there is a chance that he could maintain a neutral Laos and keep the domestic Communists under control. Over the longer run, however, such a government, and indeed virtually any Laotian government, would find it extremely difficult to keep the Communists in check.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

CHERMAN KENT
Chairman